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No. 0656/67

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
19 June 1967

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Withdrawal of UNEF: UAR Requests and UN Response

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[REDACTED] On 15 May, Egyptian forces deployed through Cairo into the Sinai in a move UAR officials connected with Israeli threats against Syria. On the evening of 16 May, General Rikhye, UNEF commander, was summoned from an official dinner party to El Arish to receive a UAR request to withdraw units from the Sinai frontier that same night. The scope of the Egyptian request and the manner of its delivery (whether oral or written) are not wholly clear. It appears that a series of requests may have been made on 16-17 May.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence.

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3. The deputy chief of staff of UNTSO in Jerusalem thought the initial request was for the evacuation of two forward posts in Sinai, which he believed to be Sharm ash-Shaykh and Sabah. He said Rikhye had refused, and was supported (by telegram) by U Thant, who took the position that the UNEF should withdraw only if bloodshed seemed inevitable. Bunche said on 17 May that the UAR had given a 48-hour ultimatum to Rikhye for the withdrawal of UNEF observers from Sharm ash-Shaykh. (Yugoslavs manned the Sharm ash-Shaykh post.) He added that Thant would not comply. But evidently, in various cases, Rikhye and Thant had no opportunity to approve or disapprove. Affairs were arranged solely in the field--improperly, of course, since no local UNEF commander should have acted without orders from Rikhye. Egyptian forces presented demarches directly to individual UN posts, in some instances giving them 15 minutes to get out. Apparently in some cases they complied.

4. Apart from these individual field demarches, General Fawzi, UAR chief of staff, wrote a letter to General Rikhye, who received it on 16 May. The text of the letter, as given in the Egyptian Gazette the next day, is as follows:

"I would inform you that I have instructed all UAR armed forces to be prepared for action against Israel immediately if it commits any aggression against any Arab country.

"In compliance with these instructions, our forces in Sinai were massed on our eastern borders. To ensure the safety of the United Nations Emergency Forces stationed in control posts on our border, I request you to instruct these forces to withdraw immediately.

"I gave relevant instructions to the commander of the Eastern Military Zone, who advised that he had executed this order."

5. Rikhye told the Egyptians that he would have to get instructions from U Thant. In New York, the letter was regarded as not calling for the withdrawal of UNEF entirely, but from observation posts on the border.

Bunche said that Thant called in UAR Ambassador Al-Quni late on the 16th to ask for a clarification of Cairo's intent, i.e., whether it was seeking complete UNEF withdrawal. Thant took the position that UNEF was there on the basis of Egyptian consent, but that any attempt to constrict the UNEF would be regarded as tantamount to a request for withdrawal.

6. Thant's statement to the press at noon on 17 May reflected a similar position. Just after noon, Bunche said that UAR troops had moved between the UNEF positions and the border at two posts near El Kuntilla. In the afternoon, Thant met with the seven UNEF contributors and reported that he had told Al-Quni that Fawzi's communication to Rikhye was improper, since Rikhye could act only on instructions from the secretary general (SYG). The proper channel was the political one from the UAR to Thant. Thant told Al-Quni that the UAR was within its rights to demand UNEF withdrawal, and that if it did, the UN would have no alternative but to comply. Thant, however, could not order a partial withdrawal since it might defeat the purposes of the UN presence. Thant told the seven UNEF contributors that he would drag his feet on any partial withdrawal. He also told them that Yugoslav troops had withdrawn from foot/jeep patrols in the El Sabah and El Amr area, and that UAR troops had taken up positions in their stead. (This area is near the center of the UAR-Israeli border in Sinai.)

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8. [REDACTED]

After meeting with the seven contributors, Thant delivered a lengthy aide-memoire to the UAR through Al-Quni asking again for clarification of the Egyptian attitude.

9. In his discussion with the seven, Thant does not seem to have made reference to the 1957 "good faith" agreement between Hammarskjold and Nasir. This agreement did not contest the UAR's sovereign right to demand a withdrawal of UNEF, but it provided a gentleman's understanding that Nasir would not ask for a withdrawal unless the UN agreed that the task of the UNEF had been completed.

10. During the 17th, the US, Canadian, and French representatives believed that the SYG should hold consultations beyond those with the seven contributors, but their views were unavailing. Responding to the suggestion of Pedersen (US) that the SYG call in the Big Four members of the Security Council, Bunche said Caradon and Thant had agreed that it was best if Thant consulted them separately. When Pedersen recalled Hammarskjold's position in favor of consultations with the UNEF Advisory Committee if a request was made for withdrawal from Sharm ash-Shaykh, Bunche replied that the committee had long been inactive. He said the SYG would refer the matter to the GA only if there was disagreement between the host and the UN. No disagreement existed because the SYG felt that host consent was needed for the UNEF to stay. Seydoux said later he was sure that Thant felt that the UNEF was a question only between himself and Nasir.

11. On 18 May, the UAR answered the SYG's request for clarification in a note to Thant from Foreign Minister Riad (who was then in New York):

"The Government of the UAR has the honor to notify you that it has decided to end the presence of the United Nations Emergency Forces in the UAR territory and the Gaza Strip. Please take the necessary measures for the departure of these forces as early as possible. I take this occasion to present to you my sincere thanks and consideration."

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12. Thant then met with the seven UNEF contributors for the second time and informed them that as a result of Riad's demand, he (Thant) had no alternative but to disband the UNEF and order it out of UAR territory.

13. In a public statement on 4 June, Thant said his decision had been dictated by legal and practical considerations of an overriding nature. Even before he issued the order, he said, the countries with UNEF contingents had informed him of their intention to pull out. Egyptian troops had interposed themselves between the UNEF and the Israeli border. Not to have complied, Thant said, would have endangered the UNEF, which had only small arms and was not prepared for combat.

14. In view of Riad's letter, the UN took steps to carry out "an orderly and early" evacuation. General Rikhye's plan called for the bulk of the forces to be gone, or in the process of leaving, by 10 June. A special situation arose on 27 May, when the UAR officially requested the Canadian contingent to leave UAR territory within 48 hours.

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Canadian evacuation was essentially accomplished between 29 May and 3 June. Evacuation of the other contingents, however, had barely gotten under way when the war broke out on 5 June. By the end of that week, nearly all the UNEF forces had been removed, most of them to Cyprus.

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allegations of foreknowledge have been denied by both the Yugoslav and Indian governments. The Yugoslav counselor for mid-East affairs said that the first notice his government had was via the wire services, followed by Nasir's letter to Tito on 18 May. Indian Foreign Minister Chagla told Ambassador Bowles flatly that no discussion had taken place between India and the UAR before Nasir's action. Both the Belgrade and New Delhi governments, however, expressed their understanding and appreciation of the reasons why Nasir had asked for withdrawal, and they both believed that the UN had no choice but to comply.

Conclusions

19. Foreknowledge of Nasir's demands on the part of India and Yugoslavia has not been substantiated, although it is a possibility. Probably the readiness of India and Yugoslavia to withdraw as soon as they became aware of the request could be accounted for by the close relations among India, Yugoslavia, and the UAR, and their policy for some years of trying to work in harmony.

20. There is no indication that Thant himself had foreknowledge. What seems strange is that he apparently did not make a public issue of the 1957 "good faith" agreement between Hammarskjold and Nasir, although he may have dealt with this in his aide-memoire to Nasir. Moreover, Thant may have been guilty of poor tactics in presenting the alternative to Nasir of either backing down from the steps he had taken, or demanding a complete UNEF withdrawal. Nasir may have felt he had no choice but to make the decision he did.

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Howard Wriggins,
White House

This is the paper you requested
on the circumstances of the withdrawal
of the United Nations Emergency Force
from the UAR.

19 June 1967
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